



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Pakistanis demand that their government recognize Bengali as an official language, 1947-1952

July

1947

to: February

1952

**Country:** Pakistan

**Country:** Bangladesh

**Location City/State/Province:** *Pakistan (known as West Pakistan 1947-1971) and Bangladesh (known as East Pakistan 1947-1971)*

**Location Description:** *Most of the actions and protests occurred in Dhaka, the capital of East Pakistan (modern day Bangladesh)*

### Goals:

The goal of the campaign was to protect the Bengali language (also called Bangla) by making Bengali one of the official languages of Pakistan.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals › Many newspapers ("Sainik" the weekly paper of the Tamaddun Majlis, Muslim League's President Akram Khan's daily paper "Azad" and others) supported Bengali as a national language
- 010. Newspapers and journals › Weekly articles by Tamaddun Majilish supporting Bengali and outlining the issue of official language
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 116. Generalised strike
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance › East Pakistani leaders and members of Tamaddun Majilish opposed resolutions made to exclude Bengali from education, currency, postal stamps, and the media at the Pakistan Educational Conference
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance › Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, a respected linguist and scholar from East Pakistan defends the importance of Bengali as an official language of Pakistan
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance › The Tamaddun Majilish publishes "Is Pakistan's State Language Bengali or is it Urdu?" outlining demands for Bengali to be an official language

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions › All Language Action Committee sent in a declaration of demands to the Pakistani government

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

**Methods in 4th segment:**

**Methods in 5th segment:**

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 046. Homage at burial places › A small memorial was constructed the day after students had been killed at the location of their death on 21 and 22 February 1952
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 116. Generalised strike
- 145. General administrative noncooperation › Some of the members of the Providential Assembly walked out of their meeting in response to the events of February 21.

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Defense

**Cluster:**

National/Ethnic Identity

**Group characterization:**

- general populace
- intellectuals
- students

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Abul Kashem, a professor at University of Dhaka, who organized the meeting and creation of Tamaddun Majilish.

Kazi Ghulam Mahboob and Maulana Bhashani were leaders of the All Party Language Action Committee in January 1952.

Abul Hashim was the leader of the All Language Action Committee in February 1952.

**Involvement of social elites:**

Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, a respected Muslim linguist and Bengali scholar who overtly expressed his support for Bengali to be an official language of Pakistan and wrote an article about the issue called "The Language Problem in Pakistan"

Dhirendrana Datta, a representative from the East Pakistan Congress Party, who called a motion to include Bengali with Urdu and English at the Constitutive Assembly.

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

### Groups in 1st Segment:

- All Language Action Committee
- Tamaddun Majilish

### Groups in 2nd Segment:

### Groups in 3rd Segment:

### Groups in 4th Segment:

### Groups in 5th Segment:

### Groups in 6th Segment:

**Segment Length:** 8 months and 20 days

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

### Opponents:

Central Pakistani Government

Political Leaders and scholars that opposed Bengali as an official language (many West Pakistani Political leaders)

Specifically: Muhammad Ali Jinnah Pakistan's Governor-General, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan, Chief Minister Khawaja Nazimuddin who in 1951 became Prime Minister.

Those who support only Urdu as the national language for both East and West Pakistan

### Campaigner violence:

In response to the police baton-charging, tear gas, and open fire shooting of the protesters on 21 February 1952, activists threw bricks at the police.

### Repressive Violence:

At the protests of 26 February 1948, 11 March 1948 police responded to the crowd of protesters with baton-charging and spraying tear gas.

At the protest of 21 and 22 of February 1952, police responded with baton-charging, tear gas, and open fire shooting at the crowd of protesters in at Dhaka University. The police killed five people on 21 February and several people on 22 February 1952.

## Success Outcome

### Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

### Survival:

0.5 points out of 1 point

### Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

### Notes on outcomes:

The campaign ended by 23 February 1952, and after a span of two years and one month, the Constituent Assembly voted on 7 May 1954 in support of Bengali as one of the official languages of Pakistan. Typically, the Global Nonviolent Action Database requires a victory to occur within two years. The editors have determined to allow the outcome to be recorded as a

partial success. Two years later, the National Assembly of Pakistan declared both Urdu and Bengali the official state languages of Pakistan.

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Language is an important aspect of culture as it communicates and preserves heritage, ideas, and identity. Pakistan and India became independent from British rule in August of 1947. The British Imperial Government, the Indian Muslim League, and the Indian National Congress split the region based on religious lines of Hinduism and Islam. Large regions that were majority Muslim became Pakistan, and regions that were majority Hindu became India. Pakistan was geographically separated into East Pakistan (modern day Bangladesh) and West Pakistan (modern day Pakistan). Seventeen hundred miles of India separated the two regions. Cultural, linguistic, and ethnic differences were also present between East and West Pakistan. West Pakistan dominated the Pakistani government, military, and civil services after independence while East Pakistan struggled for power.

In 1947, before the independence of Pakistan and India, a comment made by Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, a respected Bengali linguist and scholar from Dhaka University, is thought to mark the beginning of the Bengali Language Movement. When Dr. Ziauddin Ahmed, former Vice-Chancellor of Aligarh University in India, made the comment that Urdu should become the new state language of future Pakistan, Dr. Shahidullah responded, “Urdu or Hindi instead of Bengali used in our law courts and universities would be tantamount to political slavery.” Dr. Shahidullah continued his support for Bengali as an official language throughout the campaign by writing articles that explicitly stated his support.

Following the independence of Pakistan, Abul Kashem, Professor of Physics at the University of Dhaka in Dhaka, the capital of East Pakistan, organized the first meeting of Tamaddun Majilish. This group was a collection of scholars, writers, and journalists oriented towards Islamic ideology. They met to discuss the the official language of Pakistan and to defend the Bengali language. Tamaddun Majilish published weekly newsletters about the issue of official language. On 15 September 1947, they published a popular booklet called “Pakistaner Rashtr Bhasha Bangla na Urdu?” (Is Pakistan’s State Language Bengali or is it Urdu?) in which they outlined demands for Bengali to become an official language of Pakistan recognizing it as a language of education, court communication, and office communication, and an accepted language of the Central government along with Urdu.

In the city of Karachi, government representatives from both West and East Pakistan attended the “Pakistan Educational Conference” called by the Minister of Education in November of 1947 to discuss new educational initiatives in Pakistan. At the Conference, many officials from West Pakistan advocated for a resolution to make Urdu the only national language of Pakistan. They called for the abolishment of Bengali as a medium of education, and the Pakistan Public Service Commission banned Bengali from the list of approved subjects of education. The West Pakistani leaders demanded that only Urdu be used on stamps, currency, and in the media. Though Bengali leaders from East Pakistan and leaders in Tamaddun Majilish opposed the resolutions at the conference, the Pakistani government began using exclusively Urdu on all currency, money order forms, postal stamps, official letterheads, and railway tickets.

East Pakistanis responded with public outrage and widespread feelings of distrust towards the Central Government of Pakistan and regarded their actions as cultural domination. Many scholars from East Pakistan argued that Bengali had a long and distinguished history that matched that of Urdu. Because only 7 percent of the Pakistani population spoke Urdu, and 56 percent spoke Bengali, students, intellectuals, many political representatives, and many East Pakistani citizens declared that it deserved to be an official language of Pakistan along with Urdu.

On 8 December 1947, a large number of students met at the University of Dhaka in East Pakistan and demanded that the government recognize Bengali as an official language. Students organized protests and demonstrations in Dhaka that spread public awareness and promoted support for the protection of Bengali.

During the first Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, on 23 February 1948, some of the government officials stated that only Urdu or English could be spoken at the Assembly, excluding Bengali. Dhirendrana Datta, a representative from the East Pakistan Congress Party, requested a motion to include Bengali at the Assembly. The Chief Minister of East Pakistan, West Pakistani leaders, and the Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan opposed the motion.

In response to the exclusion of Bengali in the Constituent Assembly, students, citizens, and intellectuals gathered to protest at Dhaka University on 26 February 1948. Police responded to the crowd of protesters with tear gas and baton-charges, arresting 50 students and arresting some of the demonstration leaders. At the protest, activists formed the All Party State Language Committee and planned another protest for 11 March 1948.

On 11 March, thousands of people came to Dhaka to protest, and the police again responded with baton-charges and tear gas. This time, they injured hundreds of people and arrested nearly a thousand. The All Party State Language Committee organized a general strike from 12 March to 15 March 1948 throughout East Pakistan. Despite police violence, the protest formed on 11 March continued until 24 March, when Chief Minister Khawaja Nazimuddin visited Dhaka and decided to sign an eight point agreement with the All Language Action Committee. The agreement approved the release of activists who were imprisoned from the earlier protests and promised that the Constituent Assembly would create a resolution to make Bengali one of the national languages of Pakistan.

However, on 21 March, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's Governor-General, and the head of Dhaka University, declared in a speech in Dhaka that, "the state language of Pakistan [was] going to be Urdu and no other language, and anyone who [tried] to mislead [them] was really the enemy of Pakistan." He expressed his concern that with more than one national language, Pakistan would not remain unified and would cease to function.

To these comments, East Pakistanis responded with large protests throughout East Pakistan, and the All Language Action Committee sent a memorandum to the Pakistani government demanding again that the Bengali language become one of the official languages.

On 8 April 1948, Khawaja Nazimuddin, who had signed the eight-point agreement with the Language Committee, moved a resolution in the East Bengal Legislative Assembly stating that Bengali would become the official language of East Pakistan, and would be the primary language of education. The resolution was to be put in place once practical difficulties were resolved. The resolution quelled protests and demonstrations in East Pakistan, yet little was accomplished through this resolution, and the government's stance on accepting Bengali as an official language of East Pakistan soon dwindled.

Governor-General Muhammad Ali Jinnah, died in 1948, and in 1951 Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan was assassinated. Nazimuddin assumed the position of Prime Minister yet made no effort to make Bengali a national language. The central government under his leadership furthered reforms to make Urdu the only official state language of Pakistan, and on 30 January 1952, the Basic Principles Committee of the Constitution Assembly of Pakistan submitted a recommendation stating that Urdu was to be the only national language.

In response to the recommendation of the committee, the representatives of different political and cultural organizations of East Pakistan met as the All Party Language Committee on 31 January 1952, under the leadership of Kazi Ghulam Mahboob and Maulana Bhashani. The Language Committee planned a large strike and protests in Dhaka for 21 February 1952 in East Pakistan.

To stifle the protest plans, the Pakistani government imposed Section 144 in Dhaka which made assemblies, processions, and demonstrations illegal. On 20 February 1952 the All Language Action Committee, under the leadership of Abul Hashim, met to discuss how to respond to Section 144, and were divided on whether to continue with the action. Students at Dhaka University also met to discuss Section 144 and decided to continue.

Thousands of students from the city of Dhaka met at Dhaka University and took part in a procession to the front of the Provincial Assembly. Police and paramilitary forces charged into the crowd hitting students with batons, spraying tear gas shells, and eventually shooting at the students. Students, in response, threw bricks at the police. The protests spread to the nearby Medical and Engineering College campuses. The police and paramilitary forces injured hundreds and arrested thousands of protesters. At the Medical College, the police open fired on the crowd and killed five people.

News of their death travelled quickly throughout Dhaka and public transportation, shops, and offices shut down, beginning a

general strike. The Provincial Assembly was holding a meeting and six legislators recommended that Prime Minister Nurul Amin adjourn the session, but he refused, and some of the Assembly members walked out.

The next day, 22 February 1952, people who had been demonstrating, along with citizens of Dhaka took part in a prayer vigil and mourning procession for the victims of the shootings. The police responded by arresting, injuring, and shooting students, citing violations of Section 144. The police killed several people, and the next day protesters constructed a small memorial where the people had been shot and killed. Later, a memorial called Shaheed Minar (Martyr's Memorial) was constructed in memory of the demonstrations and those who died.

Nationwide unrest continued in East Pakistan for a short time. Protest slowed and stopped after 23 February 1952. Victory finally came on 7 May 1954, when the Constituent Assembly voted in support of Bengali as one of the official languages of Pakistan. Two years later, on 21 February 1956, the National Assembly of Pakistan declared both Urdu and Bengali the official state languages of Pakistan. The Pakistani government officially amended the legislation. As a consequence of the struggles, Bengali emerged as an increased symbol of national identity and a source of inspiration for East Pakistan's struggle for independence in 1971. Bangladesh (which was East Pakistan) observed 21st February as the "National Martyrs' Day" and UNESCO declared it the "International Mother Language Day."

## Research Notes

### Influences:

As a consequence of the struggles, Bengali emerged as an increased symbol of national identity and a source of inspiration for East Pakistan's struggle for independence in 1971.

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### Additional Notes:

This case chose certain names to refer to the language, regions, and peoples involved. However it should be noted that there are more than one way to reference these aspects.

The Bengali language was also called Bangla (Bangla Language Movement)

People from East Pakistan could be referred to as East Pakistanis or East Bengalis.

The region called East Pakistan could also be referred to as East Bengal.

**Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:**

Rebecca Griest 24/10/2015

**A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.**

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